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ABSTRACT

The project discussed here investigated the context within which college culture-based programs designed to enhance minority student retention arise and are nurtured or resisted. In-depth interviews were conducted with about 60 individuals who are intimately involved with minority programming and administration in 6 public, four-year institutions of higher education in Washington State. Minority culture-based programming was defined as programs that attempt to support or reinforce the culture and heritage of specific ethnic minority student groups. The interviews indicated that the institutions were confused about the direction of minority affairs programming. In addition, these institutions faced a "Catch-22" situation in that in order to attract and retain minority students they must already have in place faculty, staff, and student diversity as well as campus conditions expressive of diversity. The study concluded that seven conditions must be met to attract minority students to predominantly white institutions: (1) a top down policy favoring diversity; (2) curriculum that reflects minority culture and ethnicity; (3) a critical mass (at least 30 percent of the enrollment) of students of color on campus; (4) support services specifically for minority students; (5) faculty and staff diversity; (6) faculty willingness to work with minority students; and (7) a surrounding community with minority individuals visibly involved. (Contains 18 references.) (JB)

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ASSIMILATION OR ACCOMMODATION

by

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NACADA Conference, Las Vegas
October 9-12, 1994 "Assimilation or Accommodation"

~~MINORITY CULTURE-BASED PROGRAMMING ON PREDOMINANTLY WHITE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE CAMPUSES~~

The existence and success of minority culture-based programs on college campuses have been causes of great concern. Arguments rage as to whether these programs lead to increased retention for students of color or only contribute to racial and ideological separatism. I define minority culture-based programming as programs that attempt to support or reinforce the culture and heritage of specific ethnic minority student groups. In an effort to understand the context within which such programs arise and are either nurtured or resisted, I conducted in-depth interviews with approximately sixty individuals who are intimately involved with minority programming and administration in the six public four-year institutions of higher education in the state of Washington.

It became obvious over the sixteen months of interviewing that these institutions of higher education [and I would argue most others] are confused about the direction of minority affairs programming. They perceive themselves as caught in somewhat of a bind, a type of Catch-22: In order to provide a climate which promotes and respects diversity, there must be faculty, staff and students on college campuses who are both advocates for, and representatives of, a variety of perspectives; however, in order to attract and retain these individuals, campus conditions expressive of diversity need to be in place. This apparent contradiction played itself out in each of the six institutions, frustrating the respondents into despair and, often, apathy.

One staff member commented, "We have gone backwards this past 10 years. Most first generation students feel isolated and unwelcome; they don't have things that they can identify with in higher education." A Latino administrator who has attempted to come to peace with his decision to remain on a predominantly white, rural campus shared his understanding of the issues,

> Assimilation is not the only answer, but it must remain an option for those who choose it. Accommodation is a better way of looking at the issue. You understand that you have a mother culture but you can be totally successful in the majority culture and feel comfortable.

An older Latino faculty member, reflecting on his own forced assimilation to a rural university at a time when the issue of multiculturalism was seldom discussed, painfully suggested,

> There is no minority culture group who doesn't feel like they are rejecting their culture, or are accused of rejecting it. There are feelings of regret, and the perception hurts the most, when values are questioned. We are shaped by our experience.

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One of the better analyses of the conditions that create the perception, if not the reality, for a need for minority culture-based programming came from an African American faculty member who has also been an administrator involved in minority affairs. He spoke from his experience,

> Minority culture-based programming must be part of a larger strategic plan. Depending on where the university is geographically and historically the emphasis will shift. The worse things are on campus, the more need for support. When things get better, students will naturally infiltrate the system. To the extent that you have alienation, you need your own people to come to you and say that you can do it.

In general it was agreed that students of color will attend predominantly white institutions of higher education if all, or nearly all, of the following seven conditions are met:

1. The university has a top down policy favoring diversity.

Examples from the interviews demonstrate that in more than half of the schools such a policy existed. One vice provost stated, "My university has made a commitment to roots and visions, one's own roots and the vision of another culture. Epistemologically, we must reinforce the culture from which people come and then expand the vision." A university president responded, "It is imperative that we broaden our definition of an educated person to include one who has examined race, gender, and ethnicity in American culture." As if in response to this concern, an administrator at a different institution commented,

> Higher education has defined one who is intelligent as one who is detached, enlightened and objective. It is essential that we put behind these biases. Many of the white males who control higher education are not responsive to the needs of people of color; they [white males] are not attracted for reasons of epistemology.

2. Students of color will be attracted if the curriculum reflects their culture and ethnicity. In this particular contexts the respondents were not talking about infusing the curriculum with a diversity of ideas but rather the promotion of separate ethnic studies courses. One faculty member succinctly stated, "There is a connection between the presence of Black Studies on this campus and minority student retention."

An administrator of one of the programs argued, "If we didn't have these classes, awareness among Whites would be much lower and, therefore, their tolerance [would be less]. Blacks learn about their culture here and Whites learn of Black culture contributions."

3. Students of color will attend and persist if there is a critical mass of students of color on campus.

Banks (1981) discusses the obvious, but often forgotten, reality that when individuals find themselves in an environment

which is predominantly of a different ethnic group they, "tend to turn to their own ethnic groups for their intimate relationships, for reaffirmation of their identity, and for psychological and emotional support" (42). An example of the degree of loneliness and alienation that can occur for students of color on predominantly white campuses is reflected in the following comments from students on a diversity panel: One stated, "I miss having people to share my culture with." Another lamented, "I miss seeing people who are like me." And a third frankly explained, "I just walked up to this guy and said 'are you as lonely as I am'?"

An administrator having recently arrived from a much larger institution could relate to the students' frustration,

> In a larger university it is easier to create a community because of the critical mass. If you have 1,500 blacks in a total student body of 35,000 students they may not see each other all that much in the mass of whiteness, but when you call an event or meeting you can be assured of getting a substantial turn out.

A faculty member went on to explain, "Mainstreaming doesn't work unless you have thirty percent or more minority, a critical mass. You need enough role models. This usually only happens in urban areas where you also have a larger, off-campus community which reflects the same cross-population."

Having a critical mass is directly related to recruitment, selection criteria, K-12 preparation, and funding. A tremendous amount of disagreement existed throughout the state regarding **who** should recruit students of color. Some of the informants were of the conviction that it is essential to have individuals of the same race, speaking the same language involved in outreach, one from each ethnic group. Yet if people of color are on the minority recruiting staff, further questions were asked: 1) should they be on staff for diversity and affirmative action, not just to recruit minorities, (thereby going out to any and all schools), or 2) should their main focus be the recruitment of students of color (visiting schools, organizations, churches and communities which have large concentrations of minority people)? Similarly would the incorporation of "retention people," counselors and academic advisers, enhance outreach to students of color? What about including students, especially students of color, in recruitment and retention efforts? These questions are further exacerbated by the use of "minority funds from the state" for general outreach.

The assumption which underlies the above recommendations is that minority recruiters serve as role models and are better able to relate to the problems of students of color and to their families. Speaking with someone from a common language and culture, it is argued, might communicate not only information about the school, but also sensitivity and respect. While this may be the most dominant view in the media and literature, a very different voice was expressed by about half of the respondents.

These individuals claimed that race is irrelevant; what is important is that the person recruiting is capable of attracting quality students of color. A Latina student writing in one of the school papers exemplified this perspective,

> Why don't you send Whites to recruit us Chicanos? Don't they want us? Are they afraid of us? We know English; we don't want people coming and talking to us in Spanish. We're insulted. If we didn't know English we wouldn't be applying to college!

A Native American administrator angered by the apparent ineptitude with which his institution recruited students of color lamented, "Even though there are large concentrations of Native Americans and Chicanos in the area, we still only have 187 Chicanos enrolled out of a total student population of 8,000. We [two of the most rural universities] should have half of the student population Chicano given the surrounding populations." A staff member explained a possible rationale, "This is not a comfortable place for Indians, so Yakima people don't recommend it. In the past, many [Native Americans] came and hated it so now they tell their people to go to [another university] where they know they will receive the respect and support of [the director of the Indian Ed Program]. The most isolated group, however, is the Black population." One African American male's prescription to increase access for students of color took many people by surprise. He stated in a panel discussion on diversity, "Minorities don't need to be recruited; they will come when racism is taken away from the community and the institution, then they will come naturally."

4. This leads to the fourth point: students of color need support services directed specifically to them.

While the myth remains that most students of color drop out because they come to college underprepared, a report by Loo and Rolison (1986) reveals the contrary. Instead, minority students drop out of college because of lack of support, social and educational dissatisfaction, and personal reasons. Treisman's (1985) work with students at Berkeley confirms these findings. In many of his reports he reiterates that the problem is not motivation, but disorientation: an inability to both understand the system and cope with a radically different environment with particular expectations. In fact, most minorities, especially first-generation college students, are highly motivated knowing that they will pay a high price socially if they fail (Gordon 1991).

Yet, admitting one's disorientation, academic deficiencies, or familial commitments is not acceptable to many first-generation college students, especially if they are from a culture which prides itself on survival and has never been able to afford outside "help." My research confirms previous studies which documented that students of color tend not to use support services that could alleviate, if not prevent, their becoming

victims of higher education (Treisman 1985; Davis 1986; Hughes 1987). One of the main reasons for this avoidance is the stigma attached to seeking remedial or counseling help (Smith, Simpson-Kirkland, Zimmern, Goldenstein, and Prichard 1986). In fact, many of the Access Programs at the six institutions under review prided themselves on having low enrollments of students of color! Some administrators and staff saw this as proof that the minorities at their school did not fit the stereotype of affirmative action. The logic that followed was a justification for not having more support services since students of color obviously did not need them.

5. Students of color will succeed if there are faculty and staff of color.

Many informants emphasized that this was not solely as issue of increasing the numbers of people of color on college campuses. It is equally important (some felt more important) that whomever is hired, regardless of race, be supportive of change and willing to work with students from where they are academically, rather than where we wish they were. As one faculty member expressed,

> Hiring itself is not just an issue of color or ethnicity, we need administrators who are committed to diversity. Just because they are minorities does not mean that they are committed to diversity. Many of them are too assimilated. All of us need to be risk takers. People who know who they are and where they stand on issues tend to be risk takers.

What this requires, however, is a faculty reward system that reflects the primacy of working with the total student. Some felt that this is the obvious direction to move, others feared that any tampering with traditional criteria for excellence in higher education was synonymous with lowering standards to accommodate people of color. The role of teacher as mentor, responsive to the needs of students, and collaborative learning were seen as antithetical to the rugged individualism required for success in the present faculty reward system.

Similarly when faculty and staff of color are hired they should not be relegated to positions which have no impact on transforming the classroom environment. One staff person, who is in a minority specific area, stated, "It is best to have minority faculty and staff throughout the curriculum, throughout the campus, not just in minority focused courses and jobs." As if responding to these requests, a Vice President informed me, "Just yesterday the Strategic Planning Council met to set priorities. One [of the priorities] is to have 20% faculty of color, the others pertain to funding, recruitment, etc. This requires systemic, systematic funding and sustained leadership to inspire people. Resources are a part of this. In hiring we must find people with multicultural expertise. Just having a person of color doesn't do it. It is far more complex than skin color, it's ideological."

Concerns based on racial composition and responsibility were similarly manifested in the areas of advisement and faculty

mentoring. Questions regarding advisement included: Who should do it? Is it logical to have different advisors for personal and academic needs? Is dual advisement the best of all possible worlds? If they have an ethnic counselor, is it for the entire undergraduate experience or do they move to a major department counselor after two years? Should ethnic counselors also have other major areas of program responsibility? For example, should the Afro-American counselor also have faculty mentoring as her area, the Hispanic counselor peer advising, the Native American financial aid and housing issues, and the Asian the tutorial center?

Faculty Mentoring Programs at all six institutions were having a difficult time due to the assumptions that mentoring of minority students was either the responsibility of faculty of color, and/or the student affairs office. For those faculty who had committed themselves to working with students of color, many were frustrated by the poor organization of the mentor program by the minority affairs office.

6. Students of color will succeed if faculty in general are willing to work with them.

Research has demonstrated that frequent interaction with college faculty is more strongly related to student satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement (Nettles 1988; Allen 1981; Monro 1978). This connection between students establishing close contact with faculty members and their success/retention in higher education is particularly poignant for first-generation students of color on predominantly white campuses (Ross 1979; Quezada, Loheyde, and Kacmarczyk 1984). Nevertheless, most of the faculty members interviewed by the present author resented having to spend time with students whom they felt were underprepared. There was a general reluctance on the part of both faculty and administration to become involved in "remedial programming or coursework." As a result, student services people perceived that the full responsibility of retention was left to them. Tutorial work and College Survival classes, if they existed at all, were usually taught and led by staff, graduate students or part time faculty. This resistance to working with students from where they are is of national concern. Lee Shulman's poignant remark at a recent AAHE conference brought this reality to the forefront. When alluding to the tremendous amount of work done by student affairs programs, he inquired, "If they're the learning center, then what are we?"

Part of the problem, as pointed out by one of the provosts, is that "Faculty have not been trained to promote and demonstrate cultural pluralism. Money needs to be rerouted to retrain faculty. The people who have access to resources must be included in the discussion, in the management of fiscal and human resources." Providing authentic, quality relationships with students of color requires that faculty understand the social, historical, and cultural context from whence their students come.

Without this understanding, faculty members can continue to assume, as did those interviewed by Allen (1987) and Tripp (1986), that whether students of color are admitted under a special program or not, students of color are perceived as less capable than their white peers. This perception is translated into a hostile environment affecting the academic performance of students of color which in turns justifies the assumption that "they" are not qualified and should not have been admitted. I am reminded of a quote by Stent, Hazard and Rivlin (1973). Though it was intended for K-12 teachers, it is applicable here. They commented, "The true impediment to cultural pluralism is that we have had culturally deficient educators attempting to teach culturally different children. We can't teach what we don't know. The deficiency thus is in the professional, not the client (78)."

Interestingly, those faculty and staff who were involved with minority issues at the six institutions revealed that they were constrained more by the conservatism of their colleagues than by the demands of their own research, even though the latter is often given as the reason for lack of faculty involvement with students at large research institutions. One administrator expressed it this way,

> Women and people of color are most affected by the slanted educational system. The big question is: how to make institutions responsive to individual needs? What you are really talking about is the politics of nurturing. It's light years away. There's little hope. It requires a critical mass, not caring in the abstract. Place holding won't do. It has to do with the way we organize ourselves for work. We don't understand human motivations or why we do things the way we do. If you want to change the educational system, don't start in this country!

7. Students of color will persist if the surrounding community has visible and involved people of color,

When students cannot make connections on campus they turn to the community for support. This includes parent participation, community people as mentors, and two-way on-going communication with minority people and events in the community. One staff member from one of the more rural universities stated, "You can't appreciate diverse cultures unless you have an exposure to them. There is no community here." A faculty member at the same institution commented, "I have heard that faculty don't want to come this university because there is no support for minority culture here but in reality there have been minorities in this community for years. [A nearby city] has a huge Hispanic and Indian population. But the migrant workers are not visible."

Urban settings were seen as even more hostile to certain ethnic groups, particularly Latino and Native American. One administrator commented, "For some Hispanics the community of Seattle was too large. Size is a big issue. The transition to

the city can be traumatic. The more complex the institution and the surroundings the more need for support. It is an issue of the village versus the city. It has been documented that Hispanics do best in schools of about 13,000 students. Female Hispanics have an even harder time being away from home, that is if their parents let them come at all."

But how does an institution create these changes, these services, or acquire a critical mass unless there are students willing to come to a campus which does not have the above prerequisites? According to the interviews and data gathered, many of the students of color who took the initial step onto these predominantly white campuses were in one or more of the following groups:

-students who were raised in predominantly white neighborhoods
-recruited athletes
-minority students of mixed parentage
-adopted minority students of white or mixed parents
-students who did not want to be singled out or recognized as a minority

Although the concerns and complaints regarding minority programming tend to find their way most rapidly to the respective Offices of Student Affairs, Lunneborg and Lunneborg's (1985a) research reveals that recommendations made by minority students tended to be more university-centered than student affairs-centered. One interviewee explained, "When students have complaints about campus life, they always go to the ethnic counselors or the Minority Affairs Office, never to the central administration." He later added, "We need more commitment from the top: people, time, money and changes in the curriculum which reflect the truth." Rather than the continued reliance on student services to handle the minority issue, Rendon (1989) found that students are demanding action from the administration. This translates into more financial aid, more ethnic studies classes, and more faculty members committed to promoting diversity.

As more and more minority and non-traditional students enter the university this split between the personal and the academic lives of students will have to be reevaluated (Abatso 1987; Rendon 1989). Faculty and departments will have to take more responsibility for mentoring, advising, and basic support. Treisman (1985) advocates not only the value, but the necessity, of combining the social group with the learning group. Speaking out against what one administrator call a "disaggregated" system, a respondent urged,

> Admissions and academic, enrollment services and student services all need to join together. The better we are integrated into the university, the better the retention. If we, student services, are expected to handle all minority issues then others will relinquish their responsibilities.

> Student services has no impact on what happens in the classroom. We must hold the anglo staff and faculty accountable.

The responsibility for retention of students of color cannot be left solely on the shoulders of the individual student. Changes in the curriculum, campus environment, and belief systems of faculty, staff and fellow students are required in order for students of color to prosper in predominantly white campuses such as those documented in this research. By setting forth the complexity of the educational process, particularly as it attempts to work with a non-traditional clientele, we can begin to move away from a simplistic approach to minority programming toward a more honest dialogue, and a transformative education that is inclusive and empowering.

If we discover, as Richardson, Simmons, and de los Santos (1987) have, that if the minority population constitutes less than 20% it may be impossible to produce a "comfortability factor," then the six institutions in the state may be wasting their efforts. The research reported here demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case. While it is essential that higher education take responsibility for increasing the proportion of students of color on college campuses, in the meantime, there are measures that can be taken, as noted in this study, to provide an hospitable environment for current students of color. Some of these factors include: programming to provide faculty, staff and students with an historical, economic, political and cultural understanding of "race" relations in this country; a forum for discussion on issues of diversity; an inclusive, multiethnic curriculum to validate and extend the process into the classroom; mentoring and tutoring for all first generation college students; and minority culture-based programming when appropriate and deemed necessary by the students themselves.

In summarizing the findings on the existence of minority programming on the six campuses in the state of Washington, I am reminded of one faculty member's cogent assessment of the situation. He stated, "I believe that there is a need for a two-pronged approach in minority education. We must recognize what a supportive atmosphere is and we must find students who can survive in higher education with that support system intact." If we are to follow his advice, major ideological changes will have to take place in higher education. Faculty members and the administration will have to take a far more active role in K-12 education and communities of color, understanding that there are specific reasons why students come onto college campuses underprepared. Before such involvement can be successful, the university will have to undergo a transformation, including the reward of service in the community and the education and training of faculty to work effectively and sensitively with individuals from diverse backgrounds. A greater awareness of the social, political and economic problems that plague many students of color today, might provide the grounds for a redefinition of the

type of person that should be allowed into higher education, the type of person that is essential if we are to gain a better understanding of how to organize and lead this country. A top academic administrator at one of the institutions referred to some of these concerns in his recommendation, "What we need is a broad-based support program with direct ties to the local culture. We need a multiple approach. We need to know what it means to come into higher education."

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